

SPORT
TRIPANTIBES
JUAN-LES-PINS

LOCATION

Côte d'Azur, South of France

FLIGHT TIME FROM LONDON

2 hrs

GOING
DEEP

Discover the crystal clear waters of the Côte d'Azur on a weekend diving course

WORDS AMANDA TOMLINSON

I'm kicking back enjoying a drink while taking in the luxurious scenery of the South of France. But, sadly, I haven't come to the playground of the rich and famous to bask in the Côte d'Azur's glamour or soak up the sun on the 40km beach. Despite growing up near Australia's infamous Great Barrier Reef, I've come to learn to dive, and by the end of my long weekend I'll be a qualified Professional Association of Diving Instructors (PADI) open water diver.

I've never dipped a toe in the Med before, let alone dived into its depths. The first thing my instructor Alex tells me when I arrive in Antibes is that diving in the Mediterranean is a lot different from exploring the Great Barrier Reef. For starters, it's not a classical tropical reef ecosystem although there are some excellent shipwrecks, the visibility is good and the water is warm.

When the time comes for my first dive, I'm not convinced it's a good idea — it's raining and there's a

chop on the water. It's hard enough trying to manoeuvre your way around a dive boat wearing kilos of scuba gear without having to account for the erratic movement of the floor beneath you.

As we head out towards a lighthouse in the middle of the bay, I look back towards Juan-les-Pins (the town merged with Antibes) and see snow-capped mountains. It's not what you expect to see before you're about to get in the water.

The boat anchors — it's showtime. It's my first back roll off a boat and, surprisingly, I get a thumbs up. The next shock is that the water isn't cold (the 15mm of neoprene I'm wearing probably helps), so things are looking up.

Before long we're plummeting the depths, checking out the scenery. According to Alex, the Mediterranean off the south of France has a healthy, colourful eco-system that challenges divers to seek out the "interesting stuff", unlike the "in your face" tropical reef.

Alex says he often sees grouper, barracuda, jewel anemones and encrusting sponges, moray eels, octopus and cuttlefish, crayfish, lobster, coral ... the list goes on.

As a beginner, I don't have the

skills or confidence to experience it all (there'll be a next time), but over the next two days I get a taste of what Mediterranean diving has to offer. The topography is stunning with swim-throughs, arches, canyons and drop-offs.

At La Formigue, a large rock formation marked by a lighthouse in the bay, there's an underwater village that was built in the late '60s. While it's mostly ruins now, in its prime it featured a Roman amphitheatre, fort, churches and bridges.

Out of the water, the exploring continues, from the local

restaurants of Antibes and Juan-Les-Pins, to drinks in nearby Cannes (a short train journey away). A must-do in Antibes is to check out the super yachts at the marina. Equipped with helicopters and roughly the size of small cruise liners, these babies will blow you away.

I leave the Côte d'Azur determined to come back and see more of the nightlife, shops and fabulous restaurants and, of course, the dive sites. The Mediterranean definitely isn't the Great Barrier Reef, but it's like comparing apples and oranges.



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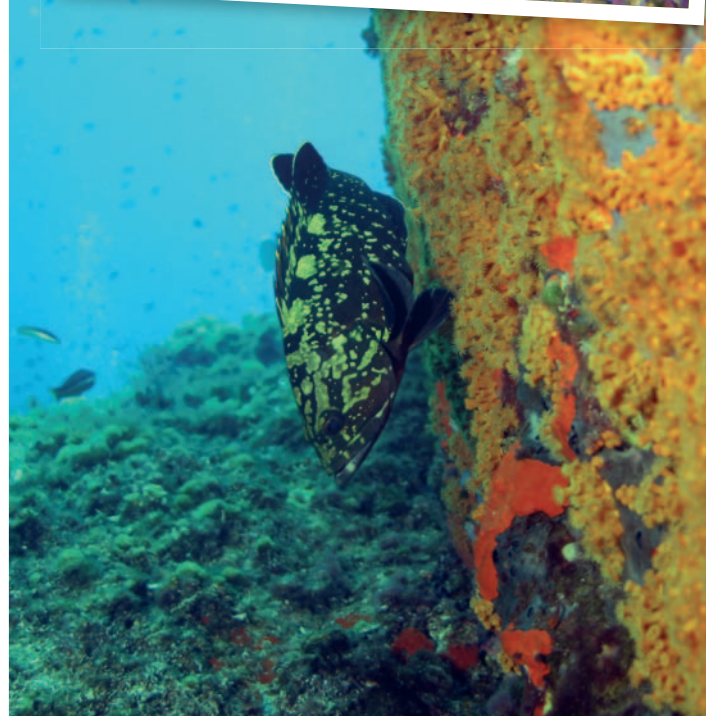
NEED TO KNOW

WHEN TO GO April to early November. Water temperature peaks in July/August but it's also school holidays so it tends to get very busy

GETTING THERE EasyJet (www.easyjet.com) flights to Nice start at £29.99 one-way, and £55.38 return (incl taxes)

GETTING AROUND You can get a bus to Antibes or take the airport shuttle to central Nice and then a train to Antibes

SEE www.guideriviera.com



DIVE THE MED

Saint Raphael

An institution on the Med diving scene, Ile du Lion de Mer (Sea Lion Island) provides protected diving regardless of the wind. There is a stunning drop-off rich in gorgonian coral growth that carpets the crevices and cracks to 40m. Dramont has a large population of grouper with the occasional school of barracuda.

Nice

There are around 30 dive sites on a section of coast that starts at the Cap de Nice and finishes at Menton. Whatever your level of experience, there are sites that are appropriate. Highlights include the Coral Cave (25m), the Airplane (42m), the Gorgonian Valley (40m) and the Underwater Cliffs (10-45m).

Sainte Maxime

With more than 60 sites, the diving here is varied. Some wreck sites include a mine-laying submarine, the Rubis (40m), Maltese yacht, Le Relax (35m) and torpedo boat Le Poursuivante (58m). St Maxime stalwart site Les Sardinaux, a large plateau of rock (3-7m), is rich with hermit crabs, octopus and morays.

La Londe Les Maures

Noted for its wrecks: 78m cargo vessel Le Donator (48m), 53m cargo ship Le Grec (47m) and Le Ferrando (26m) which was sunk in 1893. Other sites include Sec de la Gabinieri (maximum 45m) which is known for Mediterranean grouper, scorpionfish, rascasse and morays, and La Pointe du Montremian with its rich and varied wildlife and topography.

» Amanda Tomlinson went diving off the Côte d'Azur with Diamond Diving (01908-234 030 (UK) or 061 530 5223 (France); www.diamonddiving.net). An open water referral weekend including transfers, three nights' B&B accommodation and four dives (no flights) is £325. Standard weekend dive trips, including transfers, four nights' B&B accommodation and five dives (no flights), start from £229.

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